

PRE-SERVICE TEACHER EDUCATION: EXPERIENCE AND DEVELOPMENTAL TENDENCIES AT LIEPAJA UNIVERSITY

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Abstract:

Constant upgrade of professional teacher education is a staple resource for boosting the general quality of education in any country. For this reason, seeking appropriate ways to achieve the said upgrade and appraising potential resources that might serve this purpose is an ever-present hot topic in the field of educational research. In keeping with this popular trend, the present study analyses university students' views on key features of an ideal teacher's professional practice that successfully meets the challenges of modern-day knowledge society. Meanwhile, in-service teachers' reflection on their actual professional practice is examined for expert insights and used to formulate recommendations for upgrading the pedagogical education that is offered in teacher education programmes at Liepaja University. The paper highlights the need for a refined model of collegial university-school partnership that would support optimal socialisation of novice teachers and contribute to pre-service teachers' pedagogical competence.

Keywords: Education, teacher, study programme, change, socialisation

Introduction:

Pedagogical competence and professional growth in day-to-day teaching practice are fundamental strategies that, to a great extent, shape and even kick-start change in education, thereby giving it vital quality injections. The amount of required innovation in school and educational practice – undeniably, a highly conservative system – attests to systemic implementation of comprehensive educational reform. In such conditions, teachers need new experience, knowledge and skills. The quality of education is effectively contingent on pre-service teachers' personality, professional motivation, practical and psychological preparedness, professional socialisation upon entering the school setting and the array of learning and self-education skills developed at university. Teachers are catalysts of innovation and change in education; hence the need for action competence and a clear and informed understanding of how to address burning pedagogical problems.

Purposeful development of teacher reflexivity about learner growth and the quality of school practice as well as enabling teachers to discuss their professional competence and growth are viable headways into achieving a better comprehension of how the aim and contents of education should be readjusted to meet the needs of the twenty-first century. Helping pre-service teachers develop an inclination for prospective professional learning at school will reinforce the potential of educational resources, strengthen each student's individual pedagogical competence, bear favourably on future schoolteachers' professional growth and encourage a relationship of collegiality and cooperation for fostering change. Teachers' ability to manage change, develop professionally in the role of change agents and blend their rich educational experiences can enhance the efficacy of reaching educational goals.

The present study **aims** to illuminate potential developmental tendencies of pre-service teachers' professional identity by analysing Latvian pre-service and in-service teachers' experience in the light of teachers' professional socialisation and pedagogical competence formation. Thus, the study addresses the following research questions:

- What features of pedagogical practice are seen by university students as characteristic of an ideal teacher's image in a modern school?
- What pressing alterations should be made to the organisation of pre-service teacher education in order to optimise their professional socialisation?

Methodology:

The paper presents an analysis of relevant scientific literature to appraise the approaches used by Western and Eastern scholars to meet the challenges faced by teacher education and suggest appropriate transformations and to evaluate the aims, objectives and outcomes of the study programme *Teacher* at Liepaja University in the light of pressing changes. Modelling an ideal teacher's image is performed by relying on data from a survey of 97 university students. In this survey, pre-service teachers list and substantiate key features of pedagogical practice in a modern school. Recommendations for improving pre-service teachers' professional socialisation are proposed by drawing on 52 in-service teacher experts' reflections on teacher education and national standards.

Challenges of pedagogical practice:

In European educational policy, 1990s was the time for moving the goalposts of education towards a new fundamental concern: an individual perpetually engaged in responsible and autonomous learning that fully utilises the entire range of modern-day resources, such as languages, media and various cooperation networks. In prospectively changing situations of the future, such individuals would create actionable, self-sufficient educational institutions and systems of educational organisation that would successfully assume responsibility for expanding the horizons of learning for the coming generations. In the present context of social and economic transformations, we are witnessing the birth of a new human archetype – the generation of change. Provision of quality education for this nascent generation poses new challenges to pedagogical practice and teachers' professional growth.

Comforts of life enjoyed by the new generation whose time is increasingly spent in virtual cyberspace, fine understanding of network economy, scant interest in accumulating material possessions and excessive preoccupation with amusement and entertainment coupled with ability to coexist in several parallel universes, instantly change one's persona and adapt to new realities, both actual and artificial – such are the concerns of the twenty-first century youth that is brought up in isolation from their bourgeois parents and industrialist grandparents (Rifkin, 2011).

And it is the teacher who must find the key to pedagogical success when educating this multifarious and fickle generation. Michael Fullan reaffirms the ubiquity of modern-day pedagogical challenges and goes on to explain that nowadays teachers must be able to satisfy diverse and changing learner needs, adapt to rapid technological advances in their professional setting and meet the standard of excellence so vociferously demanded by the general public. The global market ups the stakes even further with its incessant call for actionable schools (Fullan, 1993).

Schoolchildren are enthusiastic learners if learning fills them with the joy of achievement. They intuitively feel and appreciate expansion in the horizons of their potential and value instruments that enable self-control. Meanwhile, adults (parents and teachers) are often unready to respond to the changing demands of the present, let alone envision those of the future (Maslo, 2006).

Competence fuels assurance, personalised vision and projection of aims as well as supports fulfilment of ambitions. Nowadays, the teacher's role has shifted quite dramatically – teachers are required to perform diverse tasks and form multi-professional teams with doctors, psychologists and social workers. The internal composition of learners has also changed significantly in that teachers face the reality of working with learners from multicultural groups. Diversity of these tasks inhibits public appreciation of the teacher's work, because narrow specialisation is generally considered a hallmark of prestigious professions. Key bottlenecks to the teacher's work are circumstantial, such as the complexity and variability of professional duties, growing workloads and dwindling wages. Over a quarter of surveyed Danish, Dutch and British teachers point to these constraints. Inadequate system of practical professional training, especially as regards managing problem children and adolescents, is another frequently cited inadequacy (Eurydice, 2004).

Key demands for an education of the future are obscure and hence difficult to pinpoint. For this reason, locating the indicators of professionalism in teachers of the future is a strategically important field of study. Information-related challenges of modern society expose the inadequacy of pedagogical studies exclusively concerned with transmitting a specific set of knowledge. Truly appropriate educational aims focus on developing specific attitudes and skills, including those pertinent to spiritual life. Such personality traits as sense of responsibility, benevolence, sensitivity and spirit of independence are just as essential as universal intellectual skills of identifying the problem, making generalisations, understanding causality, etc. The process of education fosters the development of these traits, attitudes and skills along with acquisition of new knowledge under careful guidance by the teacher.

The concept of quality is universal. In school life, however, it describes the process of education and its outcome. A review of current tendencies in school education suggests an ongoing transition from dominant acquisition of factual knowledge towards harmonised education of personality and preparation for lifelong learning and active participation in a change society. The upshot of this fundamental shift is clear and unmistakable – teachers themselves must engage in continuous learning. They must develop in order to enable learner development which, in turn, would initiate and sustain large-scale social progress. Proficiency and competence are obvious and essential prerequisites for effective action, but they are only means towards a deeper understanding rather than ends in themselves. New perspectives grow from new proficiencies and vice versa. Proficiency, in this case, is closely related to envisioning the future. Personal proficiency exceeds one's knowledge and skills, although is heavily contingent on them. According to this view, life becomes a labour of creativity that should be perceived and enjoyed from a creative rather than reactive vantage point. Thus, creative learning becomes a lifelong pursuit (Senge, 1990: 26–27).

Teachers cannot afford to wait for internally born improvements to the pedagogical system. Systems do not change by themselves while people wait for others to resolve their problems. Intensive studies into professional teacher development corroborate the effectiveness of skills development strategies that are shown to improve the quality of school life (Abu-Hussain, 2002; Daiktere, 2012; Frankel, 2002; Kapenieks, 2013.; Zeiberte, 2012).

Experience of educational action research at Daugavpils University (Latvia) confirms the viability of expanding individual research activity performed by pre-service teachers who come to develop personal opinions of sustainable self-development and education (Strode, 2010: 50–51).

Study programme *Teacher*:

For people in Latvia, the name of Liepaja evokes associations with a bustling economy and cultural activity. Yet Liepaja is also a university town with Liepaja University at the very heart of its scientific and academic life. The programme *Teacher* at Liepaja University aims to prepare professionally trained, creative and motivated teachers who are competent to address

pressing educational issues and competitive in Latvian and European labour markets (Studiju programma [Study programme], 2013). Programme graduates are awarded a *professional bachelor's degree in education* and professional qualification. In addition, a particular concern in programme implementation is providing students with ample opportunities to obtain knowledge required for successful engagement in important post-graduation pursuits such as continuing education and research. In knowledge society, teaching is, unavoidably, a challenging occupation, which means that university studies should support pre-service teachers' self-realisation and professional identity formation in keeping with the need for lifelong learning. Analysis of programme contents exposes the objectives of the study process, which involve provision of the following opportunities:

1. to acquire knowledge in pedagogy, psychology, social science and humanities that is relevant to understanding the relationship of the individual and society and the intricacies of learners' personality development;
2. to combine theoretical knowledge and its practical usage in the process of mastering the technologies of learning, thereby supporting effective application of appropriate teaching methodologies and insights from professional specialisation courses;
3. to develop relevant skills and competences required for effective planning, implementation and evaluation of education;
4. to perform student research that successfully integrates theoretical insights and practice-derived lessons;
5. to grow as an autonomous, creative, responsible and open personality while improving one's professional competence and pedagogical target orientation;
6. to develop motivation for self-education and inclination towards cooperation and experience exchange in the study process as well as towards creative and social activity.

The study programme is expected to achieve the following learning outcomes:

- students have acquired relevant theoretical knowledge and mastered the teaching and learning technologies required for successful planning, implementation and evaluation of the teaching and learning process;
- students demonstrate pedagogical skills that align with innovative tendencies in education and meet labour market demands;
- students are able to engage in positive interaction with parents and other stakeholders as well as exhibit tolerance in different social environments;
- students are able to identify pressing research issues and select appropriate methodologies;
- students demonstrate skills of self-inquiry and self-reflection about their pedagogical practice.

In 2004, Emils Arajs – an experienced teacher and former headmaster from Liepaja – deliberated on the demand in Latvian schools for teachers with a degree in pedagogy and adequate qualification: “It is hard to pinpoint what a proper teacher actually is. It is a point of convergence of two essentials. The first, undeniably, is talent, because a talented teacher is an unparalleled and consummate professional in all areas. The second is teaching – a labour and, at the same time, an art. Happiest of all are the children that are taught by teachers who reject the notion of a single benchmark approach and who are extraordinary in their knowledge and competence. They are all unusual. When such a teacher enters the classroom, the children feel like celebrating. If this is to continue, we must seize and treasure every individual who shows willingness to work with children” (Arajs, 2004: 2).

Teacher education programmes at Liepaja University (previously pedagogical institute, higher education institution and academy) are implemented since 1954. A veritable treasure trove of priceless pedagogical experience has been accumulated over the years. Programme achievements in preparing prospective educators are aptly and succinctly

described by Vineta Trumsina – former dean of the Faculty of Pedagogy: “Changeability rooted in tradition and accomplishment is the hallmark of pre-service teacher education programmes at our Academy” (Trumsina, 2001: 4). Challenges inherent in pedagogical practice and social demand for qualified and omnipotent teachers heighten the requirements for teacher education and university students’ professional growth.

In the 1970s, teacher-learner interaction in Latvia was interpreted through the prism of teaching and learning processes and, according to Irina Maslo, generally, from a behaviourist vantage point (Maslo, 2006). During 1990s, the latter was superseded by the concept of open learning, which came to be perceived as an interactive process. Democratic school practice introduced new indicators of teacher effectiveness, which are still relevant to pre-service teacher education; hence the need to ascertain first-year students’ (yesterday’s pupils’) views on a teacher who is well-equipped for educating a generation of change in a modern school.

Research findings:

The features of an ideal teacher’s image proposed by the 97 first-year students who participated in the study can be grouped in the following categories: personality traits (51%), pedagogical competence (30%) and professional functions (19%).

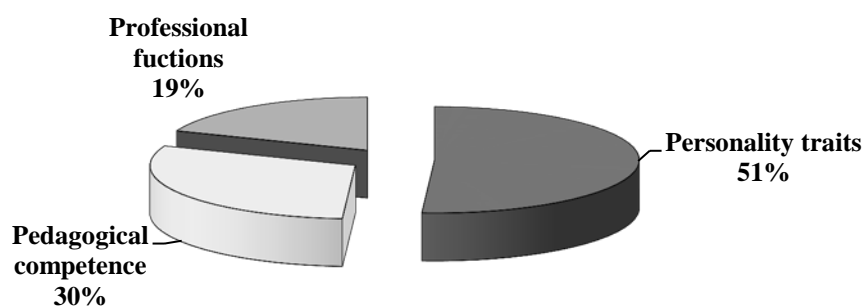


Figure 1. Modelling an ideal teacher: The students' perspective

Evaluation of the proposed personality traits exposes the following dominants among an ideal teacher’s characteristics:

- friendly, trustworthy, kind – 42 selections,
- smiling, open, interested, responsive, forthcoming – 30 selections,
- knowledgeable, intelligent, modern as regards methods selection – 27 selections,
- sympathetic, tolerant, positive, optimistic – 24 selections,
- communicable, active – 20 selections,
- erect posture, neat appearance, taste, fashion sense – 20 selections,
- always learning, knowledgeable about global news, erudite – 11 selections,
- responsible, conscientious, organised – 10 selections.

The clearly dominant dimension of personality can be related to the pressing nature of the social context at school and explained away with reference to the tendency of paradigm shift. The latter enhances the importance of personality and warrants quality dialogue in the pedagogical process. Comprehensive social change and incessant attempts to reform education needlessly raise stress levels in the school environment, which contaminates relationships. A relationship is always grounded in some social values. Recently, the traditional teacher-learner relationship has undergone material change. Modern-day classrooms feature much more complex psychological situations, which becomes a challenge

to the teacher who, so far, is still to become a consummate professional and whose professional preparedness thus far is inadequate.

When focusing on pedagogical competence and professional functions, the students emphasise the need for a teacher who can learn and keep up with the time, an accept challenges and inspire learning as well as provide opportunities for creative writing, understand learners, listen to them and awaken their interest.

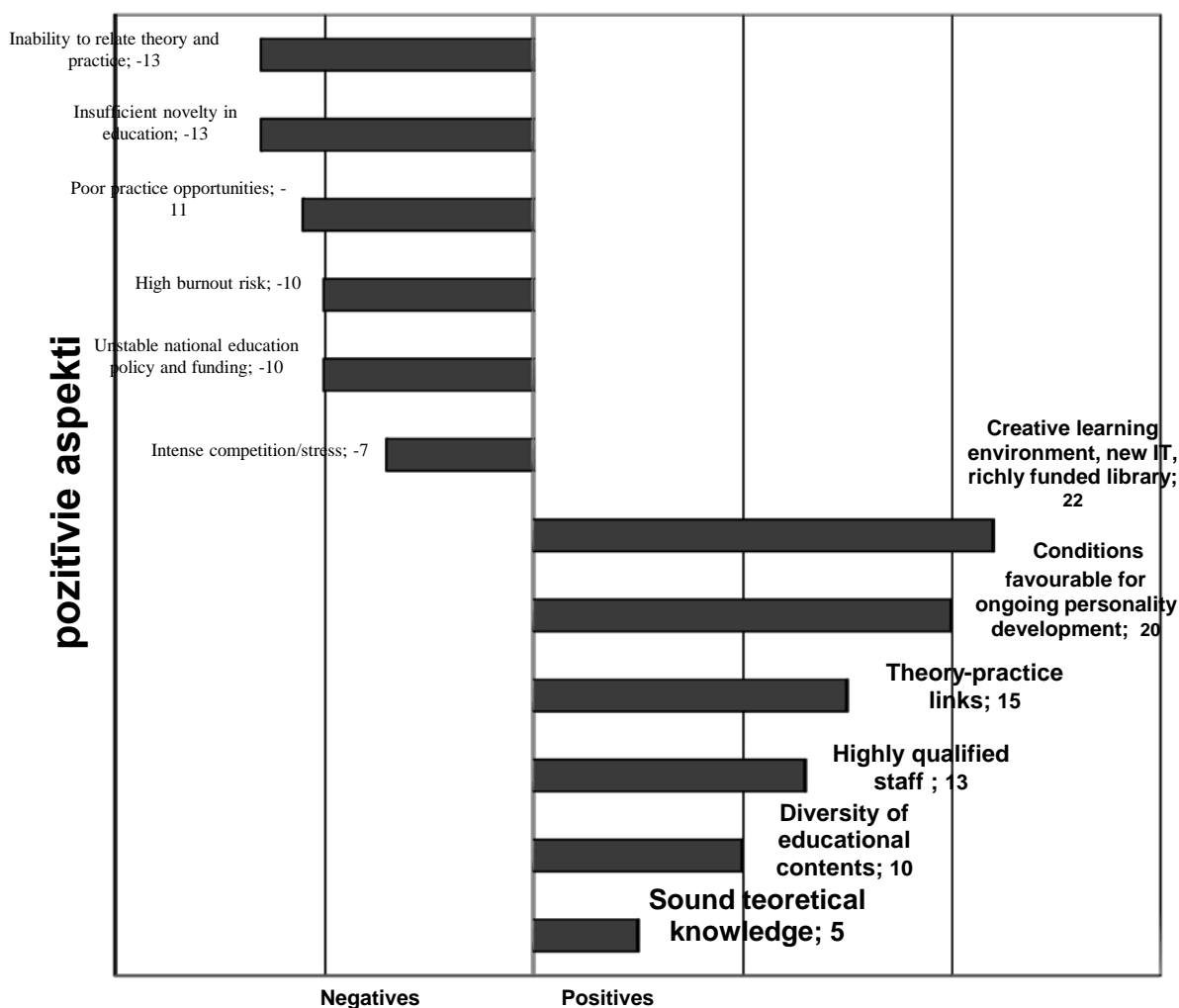
Table 1

Students' utterances

- *The teacher must always be willing to learn... not only from books but also from the environment, such as, for instance, the school, the headteacher and the learners.*
- *The teacher must be brave, especially nowadays and when working with adolescents, because the latter are sometimes listless and disinterested and hence have unflattering attitudes towards teachers. For this reason, facing the class and attempting to teach what one intends to requires bravery.*
- *Creative. Because not everyone is keen to learn, so the teacher should think of a way of exciting the children's interest. The teacher should be able to solve any problems quickly, because parents dislike teachers who complain and perceive them as incapable of doing their work.*

Evaluation of the content and implementation of pre-service teacher education programmes at Liepāja University, analysis of observation data about the students' pedagogical activity and reflection on their individual professional experience underpinned the answers received from 52 in-service teacher experts who participate in the study. The experts completed their questionnaires by marking 143 positive and 108 negative aspects of teacher education. More profound analysis of these perspectives should inform efforts to upgrade the study programme. At the same time, the data suggest a new vantage point from which to re-examine the contents of education.

Figure 2 summarises the dominant insights from positive experience of teacher education and outlines potential improvements that ought to be made in order to eliminate negatives.



*Figure 2. Evaluation of pre-service teacher education programmes:
The teachers' perspective*

Figure 2 suggests that, according to the surveyed teacher experts, looking for optimal solutions to eliminating the negatives involves facilitating the socialisation of pre-service teachers. This can be achieved by redressing the balance between theory and practice and by helping students improve their pedagogical competence via provision of adequate practice placement opportunities under the supervision of experienced teachers and university staff. Mentoring is an up-to-date and yet unexploited opportunity. Insistence on shared responsibility and inter-systems coordination and cooperation in the implementation of pre-service teacher education programmes are viable and effective headways into improving the organisation of pedagogical practice. Coordinated effort by university staff and schoolteachers during students' practice placement is a still untapped resource that can materially contribute to prospective teachers' professional growth.

Conclusion:

Analysis of normative regulations for studies and university models aimed at facilitating the formation of pre-service teachers' pedagogical competence as well as appraisal of students' views on their studies, practice placement and professional identity expose some yet untapped resources that can be used to foster professional socialisation in the study process. Latvian institutions of teacher education rely on different pedagogical models.

Academic staff at Liepāja University believe that teacher education can be significantly improved by aligning it with the fundamental principle of inter-systems coordination, i.e. coordination between teacher education institutions and schools or other socialisation settings where students debut as teachers and have their very first experience of pedagogical practice. Cooperation formats where university (a teacher education system) and school (a site for practice placement) share responsibility and combine efforts into a joint organisational system can support students at the outset of their pedagogical career.

Such collegial partnership requires ongoing pedagogical reflection on achievements, analysis of the pitfalls navigated and errors made along the way and a constant quest for solutions that may serve to improve educational environment. Pursuit of shared aims involved in teacher preparation in an academic setting and at school, which is the locus of practice placement, prompts organisational innovation in the latter, such as improved teaching, a relationship of cooperation and a better quality interaction among schoolteachers, which are all undeniable boosts to novice teachers' professional socialisation.

Pedagogical competence formation during professional training is contingent on effective education of prospective teachers at the very outset of their university studies and ongoing professional development throughout the study process, which involves developing such habits of learning that support prospective teacher's professional self-education.

Coordinated and collegial university-school partnership in teacher education is a vital resource that should be tapped in order to facilitate pedagogical competence formation in prospective educators. It demands constant attention, mutual communication and interaction with a view to helping pre-service teachers increase their professional mastery. Such cooperation boosts the added value of pedagogical education which, in its turn, bears favourably on the quality of school practice.

Organisational system of pedagogical practice that brings together school and university improves pedagogical processes at school and upgrades the course of teacher training in this setting, thus providing prospective educators with better opportunities to grow as professionals and shape their pedagogical identity.

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